DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 284 158 CG 020 091

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TITLE Seeing the World through Your Teenager's Eyes.
PUB DATE Jan 87
NOTE 6p.
PUB TYPE Guides - General (050)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescent Development; Adolescents; *Child Rearing; Coping; One Parent Family; *Parent Child Relationship; Parent Education; *Parenting Skills; Parents; *Perspective Taking; Social Support Groups; Stress Variables

ABSTRACT

This paper was written for parents, especially for single parents, of adolescents. It begins with a very brief parental projection task in which the parents can identify likes and dislikes about themselves and their teenage children. Parents are then led through a tour of a teenager's brain, examining in lay terms the areas of adolescent egocentrism, adolescent self-consciousness, peer influence, the adolescent's "personal fable," coping strategies, and risk-taking behavior. Parent-child relationships are examined in another tour, this one featuring mother, father, and adolescent son in a family room. Family coping strategies and effective parenting techniques are illustrated. The paper concludes by suggesting that parents: (1) set up a support network of friends, clergy, crisis centers, and others that parents can call in time of stress; (2) attend classes, seminars, and workshops about parenting teenagers; (3) join a parent support group; and (4) read about parenting and about adolescents. Finally, parents are urged to remember that they are the experts in regard to their own children. (NB)

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SEEING THE WORLD THROUGH YOUR TEENAGER'S EYES

Single parenting is tough enough. Combine that with an adolescent child (or two!), and you have a situation which has the potential to run "out-of-control" at times. How about climbing into your teenager's head for a bit and seeing the world through his eyes? Let's take a quick tour around your teenager's brain, and see what we can learn about that stranger that used to be your child!

Before we begin our journey, let's see how we parents view our teenagers. Take a moment to fill in the following blanks:

1a) What I like about (teenager's name) is _____.

1b) What I do not like about (teenager's name) is _____.

2a) What I like about me is _____.

2b) What I do not like about me is _____.

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This is known as a "parental projection task." Sometimes it is helpful for us as parents to realize that particular things we find especially distressing in our children are often those very same things we find insupportable in ourselves. If we can remember that perception is a two-way street, then we can start building more effective communication channels with our teenagers.

Our first stop today is at the brain of Teddy Teenager. We happen to be in luck because Teddy is about to doze off. Let us gingerly step inside Teddy's brain and pull up ringside seats just behind Teddy's eyeballs. Very interesting! We see only Teddy

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reflected out there in the world. It seems like Teddy is doing a lot of thinking about himself and sees himself as the center of his world. Small wonder that Teddy doesn't seem to be able to step into the shoes of other people and understand how they feel about things. David Elkind, a social psychologist, has referred to this phenomenon as "adolescent egocentrism," (from Rolf E. Muuss, Ph.D., Social Cognition: David Elkind's Theory of Adolescent Egocentrism, Adolescence, 17(66), Summer 1982).

Now we see Teddy changing into different members of his peer group. On the one hand, Teddy is only able to see things from his own perspective. On the other hand, he is so concerned about what his peers think about him that he ends up losing sight of his own point of view. In fact, Teddy sees himself on this huge empty stage parading before an audience of judges who happen to be his peers. Teddy is thinking: "My nose is too big...my face looks like a giant crater...my legs are too short...my arms are too long...the mole on my left ear renders me a social disgrace...etc...etc." Teddy's teen peers are just as caught up in their own adolescent egocentrism and are busy in negatively evaluating themselves as is Teddy. Well, poor Teddy doesn't know that his peers are engaged in the same thinking patterns as he is and his "adolescent self-consciousness" seems to get worse with each passing day. This is the source of a lot of pain and suffering for teens who see themselves as being unable to measure up.

Thus far, we have a teenager who is self-centered in the thought department, painfully self-conscious about his physical attributes, and believes that all his peers sit in critical judgment of him. How would you cope with all of this? Well, you could feel like you are different, and better than everyone else. That explains why you see Teddy receiving a citation from the President for being "one unique individual." Teddy feels that his ideas and beliefs are very special, and are unable

to be understood by anyone else. What is Teddy doing now? Skydiving? Parachuting? Walking a tightrope blind-folded? Teddy also feels indestructible and immortal. Nothing can possibly happen to "Super-Teenager." This results in a lot of risk-taking behaviors for your teenager and a lot of sleepless nights for you. Our friend, David Elkind, has a term for this also. He calls these feelings of a false sense of power your teenager's "personal fable."

Before we leave Teddy's brain, let's take a closer look at that courtroom scene. There's Teddy debating furiously about something with a judge. It looks like Teddy spends a lot of time engaged in critical and evaluative thinking. He tends to see things the way they should be, or the way he would like them to be; but not as they really are. That Teddy can be pretty stubborn, and as the judge is finding out, Teddy is unwilling to compromise. However, these stubborn and uncomprising teens are often quite effective in changing the real world. Their energy, zest for life, and deep introspective thinking make them excellent candidates to do so.

Our second stop today is at the family room in Teddy's home. We can position ourselves comfortably behind the television and watch how Teddy Tennager's parents, Mom and Dad, handle Teddy. Mom and Dad are looking through some brochures and catalogues. They have learned that it is helpful to structure as much of Teddy's spare time as possible. Teddy has been involved with a community theater group for the past six months. Mom and Dad have seen a changed Teddy. His love for melodrama and his "everything is life-or-death" attitude has produced some fine acting ability. He has the chance to get out of himself by playing different roles. He feels better about himself, and is not quite as prone to deep bouts of depression combined with disrespectful behavior. Teddy is interested in a possible career combining journalism and politics. Mom and Dad are searching for a volunteer opportunity in the community where Teddy could learn more about his interests. Teddy has an appointment with the

local newspaper tomorrow. He has been in contact with a local politician whose re-election campaign is wanting to involve teenagers. Teddy is also on the staff of his local newspaper and is considering running for student office next month.

Let's listen to Mom and Dad's conversation. They are talking about a family meeting they are having after dinner, tonight. This meeting will talk about things like nightly curfews, dating, home responsibilities, school vs. recreational pursuits, telephone use, etc. Mom and Dad have consulted their friends, neighbors, co-workers, clergy and some educators to get an idea of what is reasonable. They have been told not to lecture or moralize at their child, but to listen to him. Acknowledge your child's budding adulthood, appreciate his inner struggles, give him appropriate responsibility, and be flexible. Mom and Dad have also learned to avoid power struggles by giving their child choices and alternatives, recognizing the importance of the peer group, and expecting unpredictable or illogical behaviors from Teddy.

Today is our lucky day. There is a talk show host on the television who is interviewing a single-parent mother of two teenagers. She is saying that there never seems to be enough time to do anything. Initially, she felt much guilt, rage, and self-pity, over the other parent being gone. Her search for emotional band-aids was like trying on new hats. Surprisingly, she found a common bond with her teenagers in her own search for a new identity. She found it was important to spend good quality time with her teenagers, to define acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, and to get her teens involved in negotiating house rules with her. She stresses the positives, and insists that her children take responsibility for what they do (like skipping school). Most importantly, she has learned to trust her own gut feelings about things and to let her children be.

Well, our journey for today is almost over. Let's hop back on our bus and hear from our riders. That parent in the back jumping up and down, what do you have to say? You suggest the following: 1) set up a support network composed of friends, clergy, crisis centers, etc. that you can call in times of stress, 2) attend classes, seminars, and workshops about parenting teenagers, 3) join a parent support group, 4) read on the subject. They sound like good suggestions. You have one more thing to say: "You are the expert when it comes to your kids. Just keep the faith and keep on perserving." I couldn't have said it better myself. Thanks a lot for joining us today on our tour, "Seeing the World Through Your Teenager's Eyes."